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ABSTRACT

The recidivism rate of a sample of offenders in New York State who had earned a high school equivalency diploma while incarcerated was examined. The study involved all Department of Correctional Services facilities and tracked all offenders who earned a General Educational Development (GED) diploma while incarcerated and who were released in 1986 or 1987. It tracked 4,226 offenders. A comparison group was composed of 11,294 offenders released in these 2 years who were received with less than a high school education and who did not earn a GED while incarcerated. All 15,520 cases were tracked for 17 to 42 months from their respective release dates. The offenders who earned a GED returned at a considerably lower rate (34 percent) than those offenders who did not earn a GED (39.1 percent). A chi square test showed that this difference was statistically significant and not attributable to chance. (YLB)

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FOLLOW-UP STUDY OF A SAMPLE OF OFFENDERS WHO EARNED HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY DIPLOMAS WHILE INCARCERATED

At the request of the Department's Director of Education, this report examines the return rate of a sample of offenders who earned high school equivalency diplomas while incarcerated.

The highlights of this report are presented in the following Executive Summary and illustrative graphics.

July 1989

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HIGHLIGHTS

1. **Purpose of Research.** At the request of the Department's Director of Education, this research report was designed to generate statistical data pertinent to the basic question, "Is the acquisition of a High School Equivalency Diploma while incarcerated related to the offender's likelihood of return to the Department's custody following release?"

2. **Sampling Procedure of Offenders Who Earned GED While Incarcerated.** The study sample consisted of all 4,226 first releases in 1986 and 1987 who had earned a GED while incarcerated.

3. **Comparison of Offenders Who Did Not Earn a GED While Incarcerated.** A comparison group of the 11,294 offenders released in these two years who were received with less than a high school education and did not earn a GED while incarcerated was selected.

4. **Follow-Up Procedure.** These 15,520 cases were tracked for 17 to 42 months from their respective release dates.

5. **Lower Return Rate of Offenders Who Earned a GED While Incarcerated.** The offenders who earned a GED while incarcerated returned at a considerably lower rate (34.0%) than those offenders who did not earn a GED while incarcerated (39.1%).

6. **A Statistically Significant Difference.** This difference in the return rates of offenders who earned and did not earn a GED was found to be statistically significant. As such, the lower return rate of the GED cases cannot be attributed to chance but to a real difference between the return rates of GED and non-GED cases.

7. **Conclusion.** This finding of statistical significance (together with the substantial follow-up period involved) allows the reader to consider these results with some degree of confidence. This study clearly indicates a relationship between completion of a GED diploma while incarcerated and a reduced probability of returning to the Department's custody.

FOLLOW-UP STUDY OF A SAMPLE OF OFFENDERS WHO EARNED HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY DIPLOMAS WHILE INCARCERATED

The present report examines the return rate of a sample of offenders who earned a high school equivalency diploma while incarcerated.

Program Description. The Department provides a range of academic education programs for inmates without high school diplomas through day or evening classes and outreach programs. These include Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs in English and Spanish for inmates who function below the fifth grade level, English as a Second Language (ESL) for inmates of limited English proficiency, and GED classes in English and Spanish for inmates who function above the fifth grade level.

Initial program placement is based on the results of standardized achievement tests administered upon intake as part of the reception/classification process. Achievement tests are subsequently administered to inmates participating in academic programs to measure progress and to determine eligibility for placement in more advanced level classes.

A screening test similar in form and content to the GED is usually administered to determine readiness for the actual GED test. The screening procedure enhances the individual's chance of passing by providing a realistic testing experience and permits maximum utilization of Department resources.

The Tests of General Education Development (GED) are developed by the American Council on Education to assess skills, concepts and application of knowledge generally associated with each of the major content areas at the high school level. Policies and conditions under which certificates may be issued and administration of the GED testing program are set in New York by the state education department. Candidates who meet the requirements receive a high school equivalency diploma which is commonly accepted as a credential where a high school diploma is required.

Background of Research. The relationship between high school diploma and various factors (such as lifetime income) is well documented in general educational research. 1/ Criminal justice research has consistently found that offenders typically lack a

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1/ For the reader interested in this research, the Director of Education suggests the following book which reviews the literature in this field in concise fashion: Carman St. John Hunter, Adult Illiteracy in the United States: A Report of the Ford Foundation. McGraw Hill Book Company, New York, 1979.

high school diploma and report only a junior high school level education. However, little empirical research has been conducted on the impact of correctional education programs (such as GED programs culminating in the acquisition of a HSE diploma) on the recidivism rate of offenders.

Prior Department Research. In view of this lack of research, the Department's Director of Education requested in 1986 that the Division of Program Planning, Research and Evaluation examine the return rate of a sample of offenders who earned a HSE diploma while incarcerated.

In December 1986, a research report was issued on the return rate of offenders who earned a high school equivalency diploma while incarcerated. 2/

The findings of this report were very encouraging. This study found that the return rate of a sample of offenders who earned an equivalency diploma in 1983 was considerably lower than the Department's overall return rate.

Present Expansion of Prior Research. In early 1989, the Department's Director of Education requested that this earlier study be updated and expanded using the more complete education data which is now available on the Department's computerized information system.

In response to this request, the present study expanded upon the prior study in two major areas, which substantially enhanced the reliability of the researcher's findings.

1. **Expanded Scope of Study: More Representative Sample Including All Facilities.** The prior study included 14 facilities (three maximum security, ten medium security, and one minimum security facility). These facilities accounted for approximately 12 percent of the GED diplomas awarded in the study period (1983).

   The present study involves all Department facilities. This report tracks all offenders who earned a GED while incarcerated and who were released in 1986 or 1987.

2. **Notably Larger Sample: 205 in Preliminary Study versus 4,226 in Present Report.** The preliminary study followed a sample of 205 individuals. The present study tracked 4,226 offenders.

2/ Follow-Up Study of a Sample of Offenders Who Earned High School Equivalency Diplomas While Incarcerated. New York State Department of Correctional Services (DOCS), December 1986.

Selection of More Comparable Control Group: Offenders Who Did Not Earn a GED While Incarcerated. In addition to expanding the representatives and size of the study sample, this report was able to also develop a more directly comparable control group.

In line with standard Department follow-up research methodology, the prior research compared the return rate of the sample of offenders who earned a GED while incarcerated to the overall Department return rate.

Subsequent improvements in the Department's computerized education file enabled this research project to construct a more comparable control group of those offenders who also did not have a high school diploma at reception, but who did not earn an equivalency diploma during their incarceration. To reiterate those inmates who came to prison with a high school degree were not included in the comparison group. As such, this comparison group had the same educational need at reception (the lack of a high school diploma) as the sample group. Consequently, the primary difference in the two groups was the factor under study: the earning of a GED during this sentence.

For purposes of brevity, the offenders who successfully completed Department GED programs and earned high school equivalency diplomas while incarcerated are referred to as "GED program completers." On the other hand, the released offenders who did not earn a high school diploma while incarcerated are categorized as "nonparticipants/noncompleters." This "nonparticipants/noncompleters" group includes both individuals who did not enroll in a GED program as well as those who did enroll but did not earn a GED.

Selection of Updated Sample. An effort was made to balance the need to select relatively recent program participants with the need for an adequate follow-up period. It is the standard Department policy in recidivism research that a follow-up period of at least one year is necessary. In view of these considerations, all 4,226 offenders released in 1986 (2,018) or 1987 (2,208) who had earned a high school diploma while under Department custody were selected as the study sample.

Release Year	Number
GED Program Completers	
1986	2,018
1987	2,208
TOTAL	**4,226**
Nonparticipants/Noncompleters	
1986	5,140
1987	6,154
TOTAL	**11,294**

As a comparison group, all 11,294 offenders released in these same two years who had less than a high school education and did not earn a GED while incarcerated were selected.

Follow-Up Period. In accord with Department's established research protocol, all individuals in this study were followed for over 12 months.

Follow-Up Procedure. The Department's computer file was then utilized to determine the number of these sampled cases who were returned to Department custody by May 31, 1989.

Comparison to Overall Return Rate of Department Releases. For general comparison purposes, the average return rate of Department releases is used in Department recidivism studies.

This average return rate of Department releases can be utilized to compute the projected return rates among the program completers and nonparticipants/noncompleters.

The approach permits a comparison of the return rates of the completers and the Department's overall return rate.

Development of Projected Return Rate for Comparison Purposes. The Bureau of Records and Statistical Analysis tracks all Department releases to generate return rate statistics. Using the return rates of all Department releases during 1986 and 1987, a projected return rate can be developed for the two sample groups based on the number of months since their release.

The sampled cases released in 1987 would have been in the community for 17 to 29 months as of May 31, 1989. The cases released in 1986 would have been in the community for 30 to 42 months.

Release Year	Months Since Release (As of 5/31/89)	Projected Return Rate Based on Overall Return Rate
1986	30-42	40.1%
1987	17-29	30.0%

It can be projected that 1,471 (34.8%) of the GED program completers released prior to January 1, 1988 would have been returned by May 31, 1989.

Department GED Program	Number Released		Projected Return Rate		Projected Number Returned By May 31, 1989
GED Program Completers					
1986	2,018	X	40.1%	=	809
1987	2,208	X	30.0%	=	662
TOTAL	**4,226**		**34.8%**		**1,471**
Nonparticipants/Noncompleters					
1986	5,140	X	40.1%	=	2,061
1987	6,154	X	30.0%	=	1,846
TOTAL	**11,294**		**34.6%**		**3,907**

Similarly, it can be projected that 3,907 (34.6%) of the nonparticipants/noncompleters released during this period would have been returned by this date.

Comparison of Actual and Projected Return Rates. The following table compares the actual and projected return rates of the two groups.

Department GED Program	Projected Return Rate Number	Percent	Actual Return Rate Number	Percent
GED Program Completers				
1986	809	40.1%	805	39.9%
1987	662	30.0%	633	28.7%
TOTAL	**1,471**	**34.8%**	**1,438**	**34.0%**
Nonparticipants/Noncompleters				
1986	2,061	40.1%	2,331	45.4%
1987	1,846	30.0%	2,085	33.9%
TOTAL	**3,907**	**34.6%**	**4,416**	**39.1%**

Overall, the offenders who earned a GED while incarcerated returned at a considerably lower rate (34.0%) then those offenders who did not earn a GED while incarcerated (39.1%).

Statistically Significant Difference Between GED Completers and Nonparticipants/Noncompleters. In view of this noteworthy percent difference in the actual return rates of the GED completers and nonparticipants/noncompleters, a chi square test was utilized to determine if this difference was statistically significant.

It was found that this difference in the return rates of the two groups was statistically significant. In fact, this difference was found to be highly significant ($p < .001$). From a statistical perspective, a difference this large would occur by chance alone in only 1 out of 1,000 times. Consequently, the higher return rate of the non-GED cases cannot be attributed to chance but to a real difference between the return rates of GED and non-GED cases.

The return rate of the GED program completers for both years was slightly less than their projected rate based on the Department's overall release population.

On the other hand, the return rate of the comparison group was considerably greater than the the overall return rate of the Department's overall release population for these two years.

In reviewing the differences between these two groups and the overall return rates for these two years, it is essential to remember that the two groups are included in the overall release populations for these years. Essentially, the overall release population is comprised of these two groups (offenders committed without high school diplomas who earn or do not earn a GED while incarcerated) and those offenders who have a high school or college education at reception. Consistent with other research findings is a 1989 U.S. Department of Justice report. This report found that offenders who have a high school diploma at reception (and possibly higher education) have the lowest return rates. 3/ These relatively low return rates for offenders with high school diplomas at reception serve to lower the overall return rates.

Most importantly, the observed difference in the return rates for the completers and for the nonparticipants/noncompleters is particularly noteworthy.

Type of Return: Parole Violation or New Sentence of Those Offenders Who Were Returned. Approximately equal percentages of the GED cases and the comparison group were returned with new sentences.

	Total Returned	Parole Violation	New Sentence
GED Program Completers	1,438 (100%)	851 (58%)	597 (42%)
Noncompleters	4,416 (100%)	2,621 (59%)	1,795 (41%)

3/ Beck, Allen. Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1983. U.S. Department of Justice. March 1989.

Conclusion. In brief terms, the major finding of this survey may be summarized in the following fashion:

> This sample of individuals who completed GED programs in correctional facilities returned to the Department's custody at a statistically significant lower rate than the comparison group of offenders who did not earn a high school equivalency diploma.

In reviewing this finding, however, it may be argued that those inmates who successfully completed GED programs were more motivated or competent than those who did not participate in or did not complete these programs and that this factor is related to their future satisfactory adjustment on parole. As such, it could be contended that these individuals might be expected to do well on parole.

In view of this possible self-selection bias, this research was designed to analyze the relation of GED program completion and post-release recidivism without attempting to attribute any observed differences wholly to the impact of the program. As such, the lower return rate of the sample of offenders who completed GED programs may be jointly attributed to the offenders' motivation, capabilities, participation in other programs as well as the impact of the GED program.

On the other hand, it should be noted that the possible existence of this self-selection bias does not logically lead to the conclusion that the provision of GED programs to these motivated offenders is unnecessary or uneconomical. On the contrary, it may be argued that it is appropriate correctional policy to offer such individuals opportunities to maximize their potential for successful reintegration into the community.

In closing, this study's finding of a statistically significant difference between the return rates of offenders who earn a GED while incarcerated and those who do not earn an equivalency diploma serves to confirm the positive relationship between these two factors which was suggested by the previous study. This finding of statistical significance (together with the substantial follow-up period involved) allows the reader to consider these results with some degree of confidence. This study clearly indicates that those offenders who obtained a GED while incarcerated were less likely to return to the Department's custody than a comparable sample of offenders who did not achieve their GED.

COMPARISON OF RETURN RATES

OF 1986 AND 1987 RELEASES